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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: SAAKASHVILI'S STATE OF THE COUNTRY ADDRESS

REF: TBILISI 1494

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary and Comment. President Saakashvili's September 16 state of the nation included concessions to the opposition, proposals to check executive power, and measures to increase judicial freedom and open media. Parliamentary opposition members said that most of the proposals were not new to them, having been discussed earlier in the summer; however, many withheld judgment until they could see the details of the reforms. Public reaction to Saakashvili's speech was positive and optimistic and many thought that it set the appropriate tone for unity during difficult times. The timing of the speech directly followed the departure of NATO Ambassadors from their two day visit to Tbilisi and Saakashvili previewed its main message of a new wave of democratic and judicial reforms at a meeting with NATO SYG de Hoop Scheffer and NATO Permreps the day before. The speech is one way that Saakashvili is trying to reassure NATO and the West that he understands that continued assistance and support also depends on further democratic reforms. Saakashvili is also eager to showcase democratic and judicial progress in order to increase Georgia's chance for a NATO MAP and eventual membership. End Summary and Comment.

Misha Promises Reform

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¶2. (C) On September 16, President Saakashvili delivered his annual state of the nation address to Parliament in which he announced the launch of a new wave of democratic reforms. The speech directly followed the September 15-16 meetings of the North Atlantic Council in Tbilisi. In fact, the President announced the speech during his discussion with the visiting North Atlantic Council permreps. The new reforms will be aimed at strengthening Parliament, establishing free and impartial media, promoting free and unbiased courts, limiting executive powers, and protecting private property. His remarks focused on Georgian unity, thanking NATO, the EU, France, the countries of Eastern Europe, Germany, and particularly the United States for standing by Georgia in its time of need, and outlining needed reforms.

¶3. (C) Among Saakashvili's suggestions were concessions which would strengthen the power of the opposition, limit Presidential powers, hold a public accounting of his decisions during the events of August, and create greater judicial reform. He said it was important to include opposition members in an Anti-Crisis Council, and also proposed increasing funding for political parties (including restoring funding for those parties not currently in the Parliament), and televising debates to gauge public opinion. In an attempt to curb executive powers, a presidentially-proposed new constitutional amendment would allow the Parliament to pass a confidence vote in the new cabinet and limit the President's power to dissolve Parliament. Saakashvili acknowledged that questions

regarding the events of August need to be addressed, and in this vein, supports parliamentary debates to establish ground truth and explain his actions. Finally, he plans to ensure more judicial transparency, by making judges' tenure a life-time appointment and passing the Criminal Procedure Code which would ensure a trial by jury.

Opposition Members' Impressions

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¶4. (U) United National Movement members said that they found Saakashvili's remarks positive with concrete suggestions. Opposition member and Vice-Speaker of the Parliament Levan Vepkhvadze said that two thirds of the initiatives had been agreed upon already so there were no surprises. Giorgi Tsagareishvili cited the need for amending the law on broadcasting which will legalize free debates on the Georgian Public Broadcasting Channel (GPB), while Giorgi Targamadze pointed out the minuses of the speech: neither mention of electoral code reform nor strengthening local government. He added, however, that the Christian Democrats would support these reforms, as long as they are fully implemented. Targamadze stressed the importance of independent courts. Levan Gachechhalidze from the United Opposition and Davit Usupashvili from the Republican Party both said President Saakashvili's speech was cosmetic and they are withholding judgment until they see if the reforms are implemented. Both went on to say that these changes have been promised in the past, but were never brought to fruition. The Christian Democrats and the Republican party stressed the need for strengthening the independence and freedom of the press. Nino Burdjanadze said she felt the

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speech was quite good and addressed the issues most needing reform. She added, however, that the reforms must be implemented properly.

TEFFT